



MIGRATION INFORMATION SOURCE

FRESH THOUGHT, AUTHORITATIVE DATA, GLOBAL REACH

[About the Source](#) | [Recent Issues](#) | [Search](#)

[Home](#)

[Share](#) | [Email](#) | [Print](#)

[E-Newsletter](#)

[Donate Now](#)



MPI
Data Hub



Country
Resources



US
in Focus



Refugees



Source
Library

Advertise in
the Source



About MPI



Best Free Reference
Web Site 2007

Feature Story

Backstage Pass: Q&A with Makers of Acclaimed, Fascinating Documentary on US Immigration Debate

By Migration Policy Institute

February 2012

Foreword by Migration Policy Institute President Demetrios G. Papademetriou.

More than a decade ago, award-winning filmmakers Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini sat down with me and passionately outlined their vision for a documentary that would illustrate how democracy works, at least in Washington, DC, by capturing the inner workings of Congress in *cinéma vérité* style as legislators debated and passed a sweeping immigration overhaul. Little did they — or the rest of us — realize that the momentum in the fall of 2001 that foretold of swift passage for the first major overhaul of the US immigration system since 1965 would come to an abrupt halt with the terrorist attacks that pierced America's sense of invulnerability.

What was to have been a one-year project, using the immigration debate as the lens through which to explore the legislative process, stretched into six years as Congress, in fits and starts, debated and shelved major immigration legislation. Though the country is the poorer for the lack of action to fix what is near universally decried as a broken immigration system, the films that Shari and Michael have created after more than 1,400 hours of filming and thousands of hours in the editing room tell an endlessly fascinating — if frustrating — tale about modern politics, the powerful constituencies assembled for and against immigration reform, and the forces that keep Washington stalemated on so many

complex and contentious policy questions vital to our nation's future.

The documentary series grants viewers a rare "fly-on-the-wall" perspective as legislators such as



©The Epidavros Project

Filmmakers Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini

▲ [Star](#)

Related Articles:

- [Expansive Bipartisan Bill Introduced on the Heels of REAL ID Passage \(2005\)](#)
- [US Immigration Reform: Better Luck Next Year \(2006\)](#)
- [Comprehensive Immigration Reform Eludes Senate, Again \(2007\)](#)
- [A Decade after 9/11, Enforcement Focus Prevails in the United States; Broader Immigration Reforms Remain Stalled \(2011\)](#)
- [Capitol Vérité: Inside Immigration Policymaking](#)

Senators Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and Sam Brownback (R-KS) negotiate; advocates press their case; and constituencies align, come apart, and reconfigure themselves. With equal vividness, the films also portray how the failure of action on immigration reform at the federal level allowed the states — several of which have since enacted tough and what many call unreasonable immigration enforcement laws — to become immigration policy and political battlegrounds. As such, *How Democracy Works Now* offers a valuable civics lesson and insight into the political world and, in particular, the immigration policymaking process.

Because we believe these films represent a rare and important education, we are offering readers of the *Migration Information Source* a Q&A this week with Shari and Michael, who may be known to some of our audience as the creators of the influential *Well-Founded Fear* documentary on the US asylum system. Later this month, we'll publish an essay in which they recount their initiation into official Washington's tribal-like customs, explain how they secured behind-the-scenes access denied to the media and others, and offer some hard-earned observations about immigration policy and the ability to effect change.

Demetrios G. Papademetriou

In 2001, Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini embarked on a journey that took them across the United States — from Washington, DC to Kansas to California — in order to tell one large and complex story that can only be adequately understood from the inside: *How Democracy Works Now*. Joyce Matthews, editor of the *Migration Information Source*, recently caught up with Michael and Shari for a candid conversation about their ambitious project and what they took away from their years filming the US immigration debate.

Joyce Matthews (JM): Could you have envisioned that, a decade after you undertook the *How Democracy Works Now* (HDWN) project, there would still be no action to fix the dysfunctional US immigration system?

Shari Robertson (SR): Well, certainly not when we started. When we started it felt as if it were happening so fast that if we didn't race right in, we were going to miss the whole thing.

Michael Camerini (MC): Even during the last attempt at comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) in 2007, we really thought they would get those last couple of votes. It was a closer contest than the final vote indicates, since once it's clear a bill is not going to make it people switch to the other, winning side. But I think we knew when it failed that day that it was going to be a very long time before CIR would have another chance.

- *Gain new perspective on the 2007 immigration debate with [Story Twelve: "Last Best Chance."](#) The film follows the negotiations, procedural maneuvers, and personal politics that led to the ultimate defeat of the last comprehensive immigration reform bill to be considered by Congress.*

JM: Let's go back to the beginning, in late summer of 2001 when you first began to film in Washington, DC. The first of your films begins with a series of scenes at the White House, when Mexican President Vicente Fox met with President George W. Bush about immigration reform. Of course, at that time CIR seemed just on the horizon. Can you speak a bit to the optimism on Capitol Hill at that time? Was there a sense of "This is the time; it's destined to happen"?

MC: You could say that the prevailing sense of optimism was what made this whole project possible. It really felt to everybody like it was going to happen. And for the advocates and the people on Capitol Hill who were veterans of the 1996 wars [when the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act was being debated], it was like the brokenhearted had fallen in love again. Everyone seemed to have this feeling that it was a little...

SR: It was almost more than optimism: It was wonder. It was like when you fall in love and you can't quite believe it.

MC: Even so, it was never going to be an easy road. If 9/11 hadn't happened, the underlying ambivalence that the AFL-CIO feels toward immigrants would have emerged. The issues of enforcement and advocates' discomfort with enforcement would have come up. All of the things that

were part of the ensuing struggle — the grand bargain — would have been there.

SR: Right, but the opposition to CIR before 9/11 was so much more scant and fragmented at that point, and not at all the political force that it has since become. Within a couple of years of the attacks, the opposition to CIR had become pretty powerful, but at the early stage — even though it wouldn't have been as easy as it might have initially seemed — CIR probably would have happened. For one thing it was something that at least part of the White House wanted. President Bush himself wanted it.

"The *How Democracy Works Now* films take a remarkably candid, insightful, and thorough look at how the American legislative process has treated the issue of immigration policy reform, and provide a valuable tool for anyone teaching or studying the politics of policy formation or immigration policy."

— John Mollenkopf, Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology and Director, Center for Urban Research, The Graduate Center, CUNY

JM: How quickly after the events of 9/11 did you realize that the whole policy landscape had shifted and that immigration reform was doomed, at least in the near term?

SR: Well, "doomed" may be overstating it. I think a lot of the advocates may have felt it was doomed. Certainly Demetrios Papademetriou knew early on that it was over. But in the Senate, and particularly in Senator Sam Brownback's and Senator Ted Kennedy's offices, they were taking it more like "Okay, there's this other stuff we are going to have to deal with, but we'll get back to immigration soon." And all through the spring of 2002 and well into the summer, that was the prevailing feeling.

MC: But people surely were crushed because the possibility that was once front and center and that they had worked so hard for had suddenly vanished completely. It was depressing, I think.

SR: Seeing us with our cameras reminded everyone of how high the hopes had been. They didn't want to see us, and we could certainly tell that.

MC: Though they never said it, we felt the need to back off and give it some time. You know, it's funny: I don't know why we didn't quit. We picked up on this little story in Iowa — the city council election story we cover in *Story One* — and we decided to get out of Washington for a while and go there.

SR: Well, it had been a very big story. The summer before, as we were just getting our feet wet in Washington, all the national papers were reporting on the activities in Iowa. Particularly, there was this event where an anti-immigration advocate had sneaked the Project USA Truthmobile into a local parade procession at the last minute. This attracted national attention and people started asking the question "How do we feel about immigrants?" We missed this initial story because we were trying to follow policy in Washington, but we thought we would go and see what was left. And what was left, in fact, was this city council race we built into the first film.

- *Witness the early beginnings of state- and local-level attempts to grapple with immigration in Story One: "The Game is On." The film, which begins in Washington, DC just before 9/11, shifts to Iowa after the attacks to witness the growing concern in America's heartland over immigration and immigrants.*

JM: In Washington, you filmed countless hours of hearings, closed-door meetings, and negotiations on Capitol Hill, but as you mention you also traveled to other areas of the country to document the immigration debate. Certainly today we see a great deal of involvement on the part of local and state legislators in immigration. But going back to when you were filming in the early to mid-2000s, were you surprised there was such mounting fervor surrounding the issue at the local level?

MC: Well we hadn't really thought about that because our perspective was that the legislators and their staffers in Washington were the ones moving policy forward, and our entry point was always there. In Washington, you typically only get to film the principals and their press secretaries, and civilians can only speak off the record with the people who actually make the legislation. In these films, the part of the policy process that is typically hidden from view — interactions with the advocacy community, other staffers, and business and labor constituencies, for example — is the

main subject and is brought to the fore. From the beginning we understood that this was the story we were telling. It is interesting to us, though, to see how the whole Tea Party ethos is there in its beginning stages even in the Iowa story.

SR: That's right. Way back as early as 2001, people were disgruntled in a kind of general sense and found a particular focus for it in immigration that could then be broadened. Once we had shot the Iowa thing and had seen how clearly connected it was to Washington, we realized we'd have to try to find stories that would fill in that map so that you could get the sense that things did influence each other from the local to the state to the national level. But the degree to which they influence each other on immigration has certainly ratcheted way, way up in recent years.



© The Epidavros Project

JM: The episodes in the series are marked by a number of instances where legislative action or some facet or another of immigration seems likely, only to be derailed. I'm not just speaking of the downfall of CIR in 2001, 2006, and 2007: the films also cover the DREAM Act and the debate over 245(i), a provision that would have allowed unauthorized immigrants eligible for green cards to change their immigration status while remaining in the country. In some cases it seemed a question of competing policy priorities, in others like political calculus or a clash of personalities — or maybe it was just timing. Can you reflect on what you saw, and the reasons you think efforts were sidetracked or delayed?

SR: Well to me, 245(i) was the huge lesson because it was a moment when I think immigration skeptics saw political opportunity in a provision that was embedded for most people to the point of invisibility. Though well known within the immigration field, 245(i) is pretty obscure for most of the populace, and that's exactly why the White House had chosen it as a sort of gift for President Bush to offer President Fox after 9/11 to reassure him that the headway made on immigration reform was not totally lost. But what they didn't think through was that it was a perfect vehicle to which the opposition could attach the incredibly powerful term, "amnesty." The opposition energized new troops against the 245(i) "immigration amnesty," when in fact it was just a tiny provision that would affect a relatively small number of people.

- *Watch the evolution of the debate over 245(i) and the rhetoric surrounding the provision of "amnesty" for immigrants in Story Two: "Mountains and Clouds." This episode follows the passage of the border security bill in the House and Senate in 2002, which some viewed as a downpayment on a future comprehensive immigration reform bill.*

JM: It's interesting that you mention the term "amnesty." I also noticed when I was watching these films just how powerful that word was in the debate. There were certainly other highly politicized words and arguments that set progress on immigration reform off course. When your films track the progress of the DREAM Act as a stand-alone measure in Story Six, for example, you can see that the debate is highly politicized.

"Anyone who watches *How Democracy Works Now* is immediately drawn into the mysteries, strategies, frustrations, and possible rewards of the contemporary legislative process. You won't find a better documentary introduction into the world of American politics and policymaking — and into the particular opportunities and minefields that characterize today's immigration

MC: It's interesting to watch how Senator Saxby Chambliss (R-GA), who is sort of grappling with it for the first time, comes up with what has become the standing rhetoric for the DREAM Act debate. He says any money given to unauthorized-immigrant children would be money taken away from US-citizen children. And if you listen to the forces that are currently opposed to it, they are using the same language. It's fascinating to watch the HDWN series and see people figure out the language to talk about something — particularly something that can go either way — and use that language to influence

politics."

— David A. Martin, Warner-Booker Distinguished Professor of International Law, University of Virginia School of Law

opinion and, ultimately, policy. You know, it's not really an objective thing about the cost and benefit of a proposed policy. It's really about the framing of it and the idea of fairness. The folks who are working on the DREAM Act find these

films useful because they portray a part of the game they don't usually see. They're thinking a great deal about the justification or the reasonableness of their cause, but they're less conscious of the machine into which their arguments have to go.

- *Watch the 2003 DREAM Act debate unfold in Story Six: "Marking Up the Dream." The film provides insight into why the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which many believed had a good chance of passing in 2003 as a discrete measure that did not attempt to tackle broader reform, has still not become law after many years and several attempts in Congress.*

SR: How the rhetoric surrounding "legal" and "illegal" plays into the debate is also visible in the series. Though many people learning of the DREAM Act would initially support a measure to help hapless children, their support wanes when they come to hear how the parents came to the United States illegally. Supporting in some way something that isn't legal has this huge negative connotation, and the skillful use of the term "illegal immigrant" and illegality in general happens over and over again. Those cases are useful, concrete examples of language as a political weapon.

MC: You can see this play out in Story Four when Brownback goes on visits to small town halls. There is a guy in one scene who essentially lays out the objection to rewarding illegality, and the objection is really about a kind of violation of law abidingness and the rule of law. It's a telling moment. He articulates perfectly what so many Americans seem to feel.

- *Follow Senator Brownback as he heads to Kansas to meet with constituents in Story Four: "Sam in the Snow." The film chronicles the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and how elections can stall progress on big bills.*

JM: I got the sense watching the films that Kennedy and the others fighting for immigration reform kind of thought they had these other tasks they had to check off the list before they could get back to CIR, such as the border security bill. Can you speak a little bit about the bidding of time until CIR could come up again?

SR: Well that was the big motif of 2002 of Story Two, Story Three, and Story Four, certainly within the immigration subcommittee in the Senate. Obstacles to pursuing CIR kept popping up: Kennedy and company got past border security and were just getting going again, and then the creation of the Department of Homeland Security comes up, followed by the midterm elections. At that point, the power balance had shifted enough that Republicans who were not in favor of CIR were no longer interested in bargaining, and the leverage that Brownback had enjoyed was fairly well evaporated. From late 2002, he kind of dropped out of the picture as the Republican champion, eventually to be replaced by Senator John McCain (R-AZ).

But you can see throughout the films that Kennedy and his main immigration counsel, Esther Olavarria, never really gave up. He had been a legislator for a very long time before 2001, and he knew that there are cycles to these things and there are windows of opportunity. Sometimes those two coincide, and that's what you need to be ready for. He never stopped trying, and he kept tailoring what he was after to what he thought the context would allow.



JM: Having so closely watched immigration politics and policy for a number of years, are there any lessons that suggest a way forward for an issue as emotional, complicated, and often contentious as immigration?

SR: What happened to CIR in the early and mid-2000s was the farthest thing from simple. That's what we learned. And, you know, we kept learning it over and over again in different ways and deeper levels. It's funny, but in the end I



© The Epidavros Project

and deeper levels of family, but in the end I think we came out a bit more on the optimistic side compared to a lot of people. From what we were privileged to witness, this system ultimately does what Americans wish for it to do, mulching all the different inputs — "every vote and every dollar," as Michael likes to say. The problem right now is that Americans are tremendously ambivalent about the issue of immigration, and that is reflected in the policy debate.

MC: Here's an observation: The opponents of CIR have many and complex motives, but once they framed it as being about amnesty and rewarding illegality, the advocacy community moved towards framing it as a human-rights issue. Though Kennedy, Brownback, labor, and analysts tried to keep the debate in the realm of practicality, as in "find the best policy for the United States' interests," the opposition to reform has ultimately succeeded in polarizing the debate. The moment the conversation became illegality verses human rights, CIR became a much tougher sell. While a human rights-based argument might move some of us, it's not necessarily the best argument for the larger conversation.

SR: And it's a rigged game, since all the anti-reform camp has to do is keep something from happening. The pro-reform side needs to achieve the reform, and those are obviously not the same kinds of tasks.

MC: A lot of people who watched some of the films in 2009 and 2010 said that they could see all kinds of things that could also apply to what was happening at that time in the health care debate. You know, compromises are messy and they take a long time. The final piece of legislation is always uglier than your dream: If you want to be in a democracy, the deal will be less than perfect. And if you don't know how to be supportive of that process, then the other side will win — or no side will win.

SR: And here's one last, brief thought: The lessons from the experience of CIR in the 2000s are embodied throughout the HDWN series.

MC: When the next great national immigration debate begins — and it will — anyone who wants to have an effective voice in the outcome should know and understand how to use the process. That's what we learned in making these films, and that's what we've tried very hard to portray in the arc of these 12 stories.

[Back to the top](#)

If you have questions or comments about this article, contact us at source@migrationpolicy.org

Background and Resources

Contact the Source

Have a question or comment? Let us know!

Press Room

Need an interview? Go straight to the Source.

Source Library

Missed a story? Find it here.

Links

External resources and data sites.

Site Map

Find your way around the Source.

Copyright © 2002-2012 Migration Policy Institute. **All rights reserved.**

Migration Information Source, ISSN 1946-4037

MPI • 1400 16th St. NW, Suite 300 • Washington, DC 20036

ph: (001) 202-266-1940 • fax: (001) 202-266-1900

source@migrationpolicy.org